

ARTICLES

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Survival of Death

- Jan Ehrenwald -

THE QUESTION of survival after death could conceivably be made more specific: "Survival of what? Of personal identity? Of consciousness? Of an immortal soul?" Left ambiguous as it is, the notion of survival after death is a dogma to the religious believer, a pious wish to the skeptic, and a matter of ongoing controversy among parapsychologists. In any case, close to a century of psychical research has left the matter still unresolved. Recurrent crops of garden-variety trivial messages from the "beyond" had to be dismissed offhand as spurious or irrelevant; alternatively, they could be explained in terms of telepathy, postcognitive or precognitive, coupled with doctrinal compliance by the medium with the respective sitter's wishes and expectations. They were at best yet another manifestation of the psi syndrome.

Still, the evidence of some dramatic and occasionally veridical productions of high-class trance mediums cannot be dismissed. It is compounded by the record of some forty years of painstaking research into so-called cross-correspondences carried out by prominent members of the English Society for Psychical Research. They have come up with a puzzling series of communications attributed to a purported "[Frederic Myers](#)" personality, surviving after his death in 1901. Put in a capsule, cross-correspondences are a crazy quilt of seemingly disconnected bits of information fit together in an ingenious crossword puzzle of cryptic messages, stream-of-consciousness type allusions, and free associations[1]. The overall thrust of the material is then taken as evidence of persistent attempts by the deceased Frederic Myers to communicate with, and to signal his survival to, his friends and associates. Yet I hinted that the interpretation of the data in terms of [Rhine's](#) "super-psi"[2] or of [H. H. Price's](#) "this-world ESP"[3] may be a more parsimonious alternative.

[1] Saltmarsh, H. F. *Evidence of Personal Survival from Cross-Correspondences*. New York: Arno Press, 1938.

[2] Rhine, J. B. News and Comments: Fruitless Research on Unsolved Problems. *Journal of Parapsychology*, vol. 35, no. 4:5-9, 1971.

[3] Price, H. H. *Mediumship and Human Survival*. In *Philosophical Dimensions of Parapsychology*, J. M. O. Wheatley and H. L. Edge, eds., Springfield, Ill.: Charles C Thomas, 1976.

I submit that here again some order can be brought into the welter of conflicting claims and interpretations by viewing them in the light of the basic dichotomy of flaw-determined versus need-determined psi phenomena*. On the face of it, most of the cross-correspondence material is flaw-determined. Despite recurrent learned references to Greek and Roman antiquity befitting the classical scholar Frederic Myers, the material usually consists of banal, fragmentary scraps of quotations, pathetic debris from the ruins of a purported personality floating aimlessly on the surface of a disappointingly shallow pool of "cosmic consciousness." This is, of course, in striking contrast to what one would expect a supposedly surviving Myers personality to be able to reveal about life in the "hereafter."

* Psi gets through to us in two ways, says Ehrenwald. One is 'need-determined'; it is as if the filter mechanism concedes the urgency of the message, and lets it through. The other is 'flaw-determined'; card-guessing tests may be singling out individuals whose filter is flawed - a little less discriminating than it is for the rest of us - so that they score above chance. (Note by Brian Inglis in *The Hidden Power*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1986).

Yet if the messages involved are indeed flaw-determined, their trivial content and fragmentary quality stand to reason. They are more likely to originate from the living or the dying than from the dead. They are manifestations of the psi syndrome breaking through into the world of the living, here and now, in a capricious, haphazard fashion, with their characteristic tendency to temporal and spatial displacement, precognitive or postcognitive, as the case may be. Whatever organization may be discernible in the material may then derive from one or the other of the participants playing the part of a telepathic orchestra leader.

The predominantly flaw-determined origin of the cross-correspondences is also in good keeping with all we know about the sequence of brain events at the moment of death: the cessation of higher cortical activity, followed by the demise of the lower centers. Death itself, it will be noted, is the culmination of all the flaws and frailties human personality is heir to. It is the Great Shredder rather than the Reaper of man, the granddaddy of all minus functions described on an earlier page.

It should also be noted that, by contrast to the banal, fragmentary nature of material of this order, the familiar type of "phantasms of the dying" - that is, communications originating from persons in mortal crises but still alive - bear all the hallmarks of more highly organized need-determined psi functions. They are true messages "to whom it may concern," spelled out in no uncertain terms or couched in Pythian, symbolic language, yet nevertheless leaving little doubt as to their highly charged emotion-laden content.

If this is true, it bears out once more the hypothesis of the part played by the Bergsonian filter, by the screening function of the Freudian ego, or by a fully operational central nervous system in preventing the breakthrough of more than a trickle of disjointed bits of information from extraneous, habitually repressed, or long defunct levels of experience. Failing this, we would soon be overwhelmed by a ceaseless barrage of inchoate messages, memories, and premonitions impinging on us from the past, the present, and the future. We would be engulfed by a deafening chorus of wailing voices, by the disembodied chatter of trillions of "departed dear ones" going back to the Stone Age - or we would find ourselves face to face with a distant future astir with the babble and baby talk of countless unborn generations to come.

The prospect of such an unlimited Malthusian crowding of our psychic universe is likely to dampen the spirits of all but the most enthusiastic advocates of the survival hypothesis. By the same token, the sorting out of the ceaseless turnover of the earthly habitats of billions of migrating souls is likely to boggle the minds of even the more undaunted reincarnationists. Still, reincarnation is another major argument to support the survival hypothesis.

This is not the place to go into the merits of Ian Stevenson's[4] Herculean efforts to put the problem on solid scientific foundations. His reports of pertinent observations derived from all over the world and from many cultures, past and present, are gaining increasing recognition and cannot be dismissed lightly. But here, too, a skeptic may invoke telepathic leakage from the investigators and doctrinal compliance by diverse witnesses, informers, and interpreters as a rival interpretation.

[4] Stevenson, Ian. *Xenoglossia*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1974.

A more recent controversy about purported survival was touched upon in Chapter 15, "Out-of-the-Body Experiences and the Denial of Death." Here too we are confronted with the cleavage between the champions of the survival hypothesis, insisting on "remote viewing" by a disembodied entity, living or dead, and advocates of the more pedestrian assumption that the OOB subject merely taps the experimenter's or some other more tangentially involved person's brain.

It will be recalled that, here again, I lean toward the ESP hypothesis. At the same time, I noted that the OOB experiences amount to a valiant attempt at denying the reality of death rather than to an indication of survival. In some cases such attempts come to be veritable experiments with death itself. Their frequent repetition may in turn become an esoteric ritual which meets deep-seated unconscious emotional needs of both experimenter and subject. Occasional veridical elements may add to their dramatic quality.

Modern clinical contributions to thanatology by [Elizabeth Kübler-Ross](#)[5], [Raymond Moody](#)[6], and [Osis](#) and [Haraldsson](#)[7], bring into focus yet another aspect of survival research. Reports of this order, scholarly and carefully documented though they are, have one basic flaw: they tend to gloss over the difficulty of establishing and pin-pointing the moment, if not the very occurrence, of death. Kübler-Ross touches upon the problem when speaking about "pseudoterminal" patients who were brought back from the verge of death by their physicians to talk about their experiences. We know today that the crucial test of death is the cessation of electrical brain activity. No such data have come to our notice in alleged survival cases of this order. The material is usually based on accounts given by the patients, nurses, or relatives. They often rely on casual remarks by the attending physician that the patient had "just passed away," is "as good as dead," or in any case is "beyond help." Thus, it would perhaps be more accurate to say that despite the disappearance of most vital signs, the actual occurrence of death had not been established in these cases.

[5] Kübler-Ross, Elizabeth. *On Death and Dying*. New York: Macmillan, 1969.

[6] Moody, Raymond. *Life After Life*. Atlanta: Mockingbird Books, 1975.

[7] Osis, K. and Haraldsson, E. *At the Hour of Death*. New York: Avon, 1977.

Yet Moody's case reports convey the impression that the typical deathbed visions, the "dark tunnel," the "Being of Light" seen, or the buzzing or ringing noises heard by the patients were actually post-mortem experiences emerging on their return from the "other world." Unfortunately, such an interpretation, however appealing it may be, is open to a rival explanation: they may be due to diverse metabolic changes, noxious stimuli, anoxia, or fluctuations of the blood supply of certain brain centers. They are more likely to be hallucinatory experiences, *here and now*, than disembodied post-mortem events. The familiar responses to psychedelic drugs or Wilder Penfield's experiments with electrical stimulation of the brain illustrate the same point.

Similar considerations apply to the OOB experiences Moody[6] and Osis and Haraldsson[7] have described in dying patients. Yet as I pointed out in Chapter 15, they are in effect dramatic illustrations of the universal human need to deny the reality of death. By the same token, the incidence of the identical deathbed observations found by Osis and Haraldsson in such diverse cultures as North American, East Indian, or Icelandic can readily be explained by reference to the identical neuro-physiological organization of the human brain, including its vulnerability to anoxia and other afflictions.

There is another feature of deathbed observations that calls for comment in the present context: the feeling of serenity, peace of mind, and even euphoria reported by some patients. These too can more readily be interpreted in "this-worldly" than in "other-worldly" terms. They may be due partly to successful denial of the patient's plight and partly to the relief attending the cessation of pain and suffering once he has passed the point of crisis: "Yes, I have been close to death, but how good it is now to be back and alive again!"

Hallucinatory wish fulfillment may also be responsible for the frequently reported visions of the patients' departed friends or relatives at their bedside. Wish fulfillment is a characteristic feature of dreams, reveries, and hallucinations alike. But the dramatic appearance or apparition of a departed "dear one" is also apt to meet the patient's need to deny the imminence of death - or the reality of death in general: "Lo and behold, he or she has returned from the grave ... If so, I too may be immune to death and have a new lease on life again..." In some cases it appears that the purportedly dying patient's faith and belief in a life hereafter is reinforced by corresponding attitudes of his friends and relations - including the investigator as a participating observer of the death-bed scene.

If this is true, most claims of apparent survival near death or after resuscitation result from a blend of hallucinatory wish fulfillment and massive denial of illness in terms of familiar defensive maneuvers. They are due to a combination of what neurologists describe as anosognosia, or imperception of organic illness, and typical ego defenses in the Freudian sense. Occasional veridical elements entering the picture may then give rise to reports of "phantasms of the living" or apparitions described by early workers in psychical research.

This is certainly not the last word on the survival hypothesis. We have seen in Chapter 15 that its advocates are still inclined to claim cross-correspondences, reincarnation, or "remote viewing" by OOB subjects to buttress their case. But at the risk of taking the fun out of the process of dying and denying, I submit that, here again, doctrinal compliance, Rhine's "super-psi"[2], or H. H. Price's "this-world ESP"[3] are more parsimonious explanatory hypotheses.

Still, last-ditch defenders of the survivalist position may ask at this point whether or not the principle of parsimony or other postulates of the scientific method may be legitimately invoked as the final arbiters at such extremes of the human condition as birth and death - emergence and eclipse of individual consciousness? Such an argument is not without its merits. Our beginning and end cannot apparently be encompassed within the closed, self-sealing system of traditional science. I noted earlier that the same considerations apply to the world encompassed by classical physics and geometry, Newtonian mechanics, Euclidian geometry, and pre-Einsteinian physics cannot possibly do justice to events on the subatomic, quantum mechanical scale. The familiar laws of nature break down in the face of cosmic distances, of velocities exceeding the speed of light. The infinitely small and the infinitely large are beyond the comprehension of the Euclidian mind: it throws both our habits of logical thinking and our monitoring devices out of kilter. The problem of individual survival belongs in the same category. It is not subject to "falsifiability." It can neither be conclusively asserted nor conclusively refuted and must therefore be respectfully passed to the attention of the theologian or speculative philosopher.

Note:

The above article was taken from Jan Ehrenwald's "The ESP Experience. A Psychiatric Validation" (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

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